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AUTHOR	Wagner, June G.
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ABSTRACT

This document contains three articles on teaching the growing population of nontraditional students. "The Changing Demographics of the Classroom" defines "nontraditional students"; reviews the characteristics, risk factors, and special needs of nontraditional students; and identifies the following services as particularly important to nontraditional students: (1) separate registration, orientation, and advising; (2) greater availability of parking; (3) more evening, weekend, and distance learning programs, including telecourses and online courses; (4) special assistance with financial aid, child care, and housing; (5) student support services such as counseling, assessment, and peer support groups; (6) social activities geared toward older students and their families; and (7) better preparation of educators and staff in meeting nontraditional students' needs. "Teaching and Retaining Nontraditional Students" discusses the importance of showing nontraditional students respect and confidence, multicultural issues that must be addressed when teaching nontraditional students, and the importance of using active learning strategies and regular feedback mechanisms and providing a student support network. "Online Classes and Nontraditional Students" presents guidelines for facilitating interaction and performance, underscores the importance of allowing nontraditional students some flexibility with due dates and assignments but not allowing students to mistake flexibility for laxity, and offers specific suggestions for building effective World Wide Web pages. (MN)

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Keying In

The Newsletter of the National Business Education Association

Volume 13 Number 2 November 2002

Teaching the Growing Population of Nontraditional Students

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Keying In

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Volume 13 Number 2 November 2002

TEACHING THE GROWING POPULATION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

The Changing Demographics of the Classroom

"I was a small business owner for 20 years when a midlife crisis caused me to evaluate my bigger personal life goals and move on," says **Jeffrey Brawn**, who is now the director of the Zenith Alternative Education program in Camden, Maine. While he has been working long hours to renew the school's alternative education program, he has also been taking intensive graduate level courses for the past three years and has two more courses to complete in order to meet all of his state's teacher certification requirements.

Margaret Popp of East Millinocket, Maine, is also pursuing a new career in education after being a stay-at-home mom and later working at a petroleum company. When she began her coursework, she had not been in the classroom as a student for over 12 years. Currently, she is teaching business part-time at the local high school and completing many of her course requirements online.

Herbert Wachtel, a 68-year-old retired cardiologist, is taking classes on the history of the Middle East and on Donizetti's operas at the Lifelong Learning Center at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida. "For me, it's an opportunity to enjoy learning about topics I never had time to pursue during my working life," he says. He and his wife have been taking classes at the center for the past four years. Enormously popular, the classes offered by the center are specifically designed for retirees; there are no degree objectives, no grades, and no exams.

Defining Nontraditional Students

Brawn, Popp, and Wachtel are part of the growing trend of nontraditional students who are becoming increasingly prevalent on campuses across the United States. Thirty years ago, the majority of students at most college campuses were fresh out of high school, white, male, middle class, and attended classes full-time. Today, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education, the proportion of students who are older, female, Asian, African American, Hispanic, and part-time has been growing rapidly (Allen, 2002).

Linda Hefferin, a business management professor at Elgin Community College in Elgin, Illinois, notes that "an increasing percentage of students at all levels of education are now nontraditional, almost to the point that it's difficult to define what 'traditional' means any more. Today, the 'traditional college student right out of high school who speaks English as his/her first language is in the minority." **Susan**

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Teaching and Retaining Nontraditional Students

Research on adult education has discovered some important differences in how adults approach learning and therefore in how teachers should structure their class environments in order to facilitate the education and retention of these students.

The Importance of Showing Respect and Confidence

According to statistics gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), older students, especially those 40 or older, are more likely to earn A's than students who are 18 or younger or between 19 and 23 (Horn et al., 2002). Yet while older students may end up earning the highest grades, they often begin classes with a lack confidence in their ability to compete with younger students. Older students also tend to have life experiences relating to work and family and are anxious about being accepted and respected as knowledgeable, experienced adults.

"Nontraditional students are highly motivated, mature, and often have plenty of business experience to apply to the classroom," says **John J. Olivo**, a

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Jaderstrom, a coordinator/instructor in the business office technology department at Santa Rosa Junior College in Petaluma, California, concurs. "The nontraditional students *are* our traditional students," she says.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines a nontraditional student by the presence of one or more of the following seven characteristics:

- Delayed enrollment into postsecondary education (usually after age 25);
- Part-time enrollment;
- Financially independent;
- Employed full-time while enrolled;
- Has dependents other than a spouse;
- Single parent;
- Did not obtain a standard high school diploma (1996).

According to current enrollment statistics, one-third to one-half of all college students are currently classified as nontraditional and more than half of all graduate students are over 30 years old (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992). The NCES reports that the greatest increase in college attendance has been by women, who comprised 56 percent of all undergraduates in 1999-2000. Among undergraduates in their 30s, women constituted 62 percent of the total undergraduate population. Minority students comprised approximately one-third of the undergraduate population, including 12 percent African American, 11 percent Hispanic, and five percent Asian (Horn et al., 2002). The average age of undergraduates was 26 years old (see Figure 1).

Baby boomers, who can expect to remain physically and mentally active into their 70s and beyond, are returning to college in record numbers. Indeed, older adults make up the fastest growing segment of the student population in higher education, and this trend is expected to continue well into the middle of the 21st century.

Characteristics of Nontraditional Students

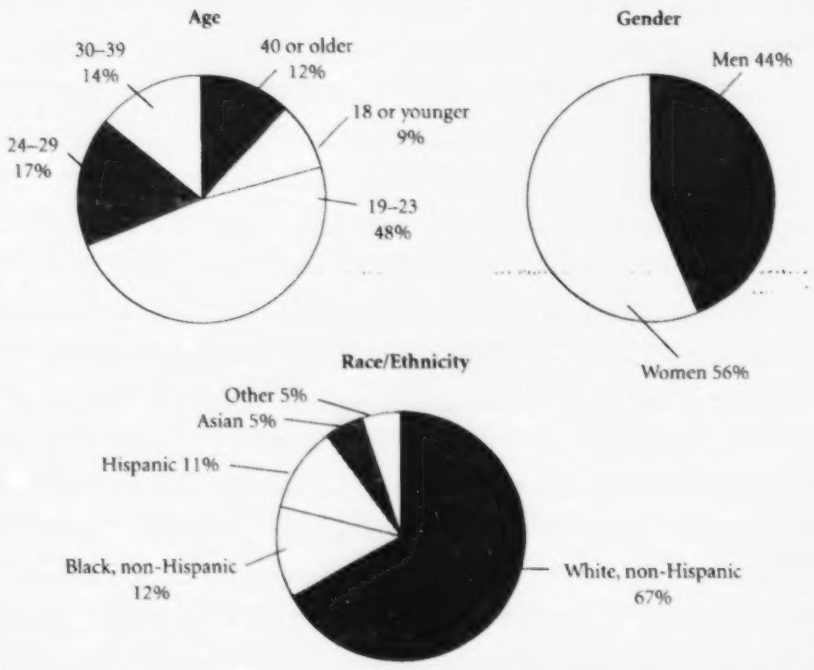
Many nontraditional students return to school to complete educational studies they began as traditional-age students. Observes Popp: "The first time I went to traditional college was not a good experience for me, and I dropped out after one year. I got married and had two children." Popp has been a nontraditional student twice, the first time completing her undergraduate degree in business administration and the second time pursing her teacher certification.

One of the main reasons adults return to school is to advance in their careers or to keep up with new knowledge, skills, or credentialing requirements in their field. **Peter F. Meggison**, the coordinator of computer technology and information management at Massasoit Community College in Brockton, Massachusetts, estimates that nearly 50 percent of the students at his college are nontraditional. "Many already have degrees in other areas (liberal arts, allied health, etc.) and want to learn the business skills they need to acquire a new job or enhance their current job," he says.

Many classes are composed of immigrants seeking to acquire new job skills. "Our largest and most rapidly growing program at Elgin Community College is our English as a Second Language program," observes Hefferin. "Many of these students were degreed professionals in their home country, but they are unable to find the same level of employment here. They need to learn English as well as some type of job-related skill."

The changing economy has also played a significant role in contributing to

Figure 1. Percentage Distributions of 1999-2000 Undergraduates by Age, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPAS: 2000).

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Writer and Editor: June G. Wagner

the growing numbers of older adults enrolling in postsecondary education. "The decline of the blue-collar manufacturing sector of the economy has displaced many workers, forcing them to choose between lower wage service-sector jobs or enrolling in postsecondary education to obtain the skills necessary for technical- or professional-level jobs," notes the NCES (1996, Introduction, p. 2).

Other reasons adults return to school include major life transitions, such as marriage, divorce, or the death of a spouse. Changes in leisure patterns (retirement or children leaving home) and the pursuit of learning for self-improvement or enjoyment are additional factors.

Because career and family changes often motivate adults to return to school, these students tend to have a stronger consumer orientation toward education, viewing it as an investment in their livelihoods. Indeed, the increase in divorce rates, as well as the high number of single-parent households headed by women, has led many adult women to enroll in classes as a way to achieve greater economic security. More than traditional students, adult students are aware of the direct impact their coursework will have on the quality of their own lives and those of their families.

Risk Factors of Nontraditional Students

"Most nontraditional students have given up a lot to return to class and are very focused," says **Arthur McEntee**, an associate professor emeritus at the University of Maine at Machias in Machias, Maine. "They tend to produce superior work and go over and beyond teacher expectations." Jaderstrom concurs. "Most adult students are highly motivated to succeed—they do what they have to do to change their lives," she says. "Unfortunately, they also encounter numerous problems with child care, transportation, illness, and sometimes lack of support at home."

Because of multiple commitments and responsibilities outside of school, the NCES has found that nontraditional students are at an increased risk for attrition. The risk increases in proportion to the number of the seven nontraditional characteristics that they possess. The average number of nontraditional characteristics among undergraduates for 1986, 1989, and 1992 is shown in Figure 2.

Highly nontraditional students with four or more of the seven defining characteristics had a higher attrition rate than those who were minimally nontraditional (one characteristic). Women, who make up a growing proportion of nontraditional students and who are usually the main caregivers in their families, are often most at risk.

"Regardless of nontraditional students' academic preparation, if they cannot make adequate child care arrangements, adjust their work schedules, or pay for college, they simply will not persist in school," points out the NCES (1996, Introduction, p. 2). Among undergraduates seeking a bachelor's degree, approximately 31 percent of nontraditional students had obtained a degree within five years versus 54 percent of traditional students. Nontraditional students were more than twice as likely to leave school in their first year as were traditional students. For students who were able to continue to their second year of study, the attrition rate of nontraditional students was much closer to the rate of traditional students (NCES, 1996).

The Different Needs of Nontraditional Students

For older adults who have not been in a classroom setting for a number of years, returning to school can be extremely intimidating, observes McEntee. They tend to worry about a lack of peers their own age and feel inadequate about their academic skills. Research on nontraditional students has shown that both sexes experience fear of failure and self-doubt. Men tend to suffer more from lack of self-confidence while women experience guilt about the competing pressures of child care responsibilities (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992).

Nontraditional students need more varied kinds of support and assistance not only from their family and friends, but also from instructors and the institutions where they are attending classes. "Adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, acquiring or refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school," note Benshoff and Lewis (1992, p. 2). They also benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers and value opportunities to integrate academic content with life and work experiences.

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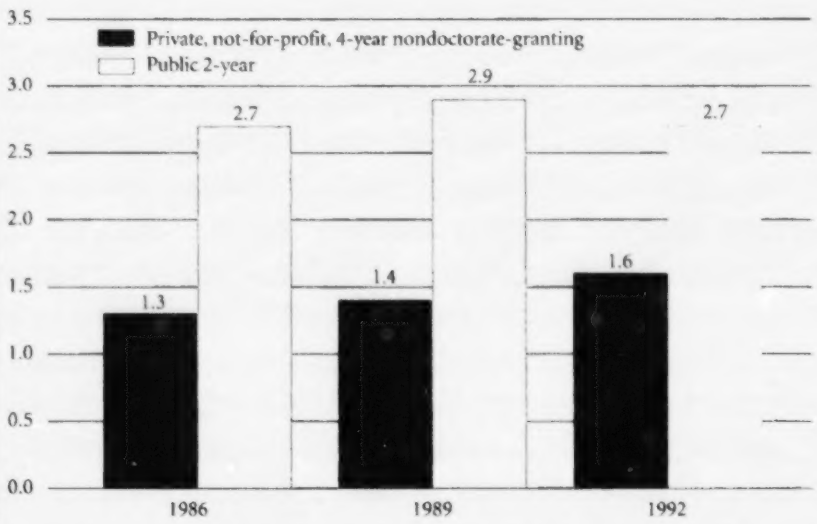
Figure 2. Average Number of Nontraditional Characteristics Among All Undergraduates by Institution Type: Fall 1986, 1989, 1992.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPAS: 1987, 1990, 1993).

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Because of their complex schedules—juggling work and family responsibilities—nontraditional students also have a special need for flexible schedules and instruction methodologies, such as Web-based courses. Both Brawn and Popp, for example, have relied on online learning to accomplish their career objectives.

Implications for Educational Institutions

Because nontraditional students are rapidly becoming the new majority in classrooms, business educators and policymakers must recognize and respond to the educational expectations of this new student population. Their need for more flexible and convenient kinds of knowledge delivery is spurring educational institutions to modify existing programs and develop new services. Researchers have identified a number of services that are particularly important to nontraditional students:

- Separate registration, orientation, and advising;
- Greater availability of parking;
- More evening, weekend, and distance learning programs, including telecourses and online classes;
- Special assistance with financial aid, child care, and housing;
- Student support services such as counseling, assessment, peer support groups, etc.;
- Social activities geared toward older students and their families; and
- Better preparation of educators and staff in meeting the needs of nontraditional students (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992).

Flexibility seems to be the key factor in attracting and enrolling nontraditional students. New Mexico, for example, has pioneered many services and organizations specifically tailored for nontraditional students and ranks first in enrolling students between the ages of 25 and 64 (Sundberg, 2001). Work study and state incentive grants are available to nontraditional students. Peer mentoring and tutoring programs are also available at all institutions in the state. In addition, small business development centers are available to students free of charge. These centers provide training, counseling, and referrals for students interested in developing a small business. Adult reentry programs provide assistance with transportation, child care, part-time employment, financial aid, goal setting, and career counseling.

In Massachusetts, Massasoit Community College offers many short-term certificates (15 or 30 credits) in addition to the two-year associate degree programs in order to accommodate the busy schedules of nontraditional students. "All of our computer application courses are also modularized into 15-hour, one-credit segments," observes Meggison. "For example, we have beginning, intermediate, and advanced Excel, Word, Powerpoint, Windows, Access, etc. This way students are not 'forced' to take a three-credit course, half of which they already know, and be bored for half of the semester. This has been extremely successful. People currently employed who know something about computers can come in at whatever level they need."

Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, offers its entire master's in business education program online and has had great success with it, observes **Nancy Groneman**, a professor of business education at the university. This fall the Teachers College will be starting an online master's degree that will allow students to obtain certification/licensure as a teacher. "The students have to be employed by a school district in order to be in the program," she notes.

"Our college was the first in Illinois to realize that a growing number of nontraditional students would not be willing or able to visit campus three times a week for 16 weeks as most of us had done to complete our degree," says Hefferin. Today, Elgin Community College offers both online and telecourses as well as structured classes to attract nontraditional students. "Even the 'traditional' scheduling of 16-week courses is disappearing," notes Hefferin. "Today's students want to get in and complete their courses in less time, so we offer a variety of scheduling options. These nontraditional students have different needs, so we better be offering courses to accommodate their needs or some other institution will. Overall, I think this variety in student populations makes our job as business teachers more challenging but also more interesting." ■

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professor in the business education and office information systems department at Bloomsburg University in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. "Teachers need to give verbal recognition of their knowledge," observes **Arthur McEntee**, "and permit them to share this knowledge."

Peter F. Meggison agrees. "Many nontraditional students bring their own work experiences/situations into the classroom, and this can be used to serve as the basis for discussion; in other words, they are often catalysts—spearheading meaningful discussion," he says.

However, occasionally nontraditional students are so intent on receiving a high grade that it can create friction with younger students, notes McEntee. Teachers need to appreciate the different ages and abilities of their students and consider using a noncompetitive grading system. Grading on a curve encourages students to compete with each other and discourages them from working together. Noncompetitive grading based on high but absolute standards creates a community of learners where the students and the teacher are jointly striving for success (Allen, 2002).

All students must be made to feel welcome and encouraged to interact with each other. "A good teacher needs to be able to draw from the strengths of all the class members," says McEntee. "Ideally, there is a cross-fertilization that occurs where different students learn from each other."

Many nontraditional students are also first-generation college students who may not see themselves as professionals and may not be aware of the range of career opportunities available to college graduates. "Our classrooms are filled with nontraditional students including

vocational rehabilitation and worker's compensation referrals, people on parole, women returning to school after being at home for many years, people switching careers, retirees, etc.," notes **Susan Jaderstrom**. Teachers need to express confidence in all these students and in their ability to learn.

Encouraging office hour visits and providing informal advising may also help nontraditional students feel more comfortable and help them deal with some of the often self-imposed barriers to success. "Nontraditional students need encouragement to go in and talk to their teachers so that they have a better idea of the expectations for completing the coursework," observes McEntee. Indeed, research has shown that teachers seem to be a key factor in the retention of adult students. A few words of encouragement can make an enormous difference, notes McEntee.

To enhance their likelihood of academic success and increase their comfort level, Santa Rosa Junior College in Petaluma, California, holds special orientation meetings for nontraditional students before classes begin. These are conducted jointly by the instructors and a counselor. "The purpose of these meetings is to discuss with the students specifically what it would be like to return to school. If, during orientation, a student says, 'I have five kids. I am going to miss class for illness, school functions, etc.,' the counselor would then suggest that the student take fewer classes or offer some other educational option," says Jaderstrom.

"During our orientation meetings, we try to describe the requirements of attending college and our classes so that students can think about whether they can really make the commitment to be successful," says Jaderstrom. "Typically, those students who enrolled at the last minute and did not have a chance to attend an orientation session are not as successful as those who are prepared for the rigor and changes in their lives."

Multicultural Issues

The student population at all levels, whether it's at the K-12 or the community college and university levels, has become increasingly diverse over the last 20 years. By the year 2010, experts estimate that approximately 38 percent of individuals under the age of 18 will be African, Asian, or Hispanic American, and in 26 states and the District of Columbia, at least one-fourth of the population will be African, Hispanic, or Native or Asian American (Zeszotarski, 1998).

In addition, 1 in 10 undergraduates was born in the U.S. but had at least one foreign-born parent. Thirteen percent of undergraduates speak a language other than English in the home while growing up (Horn et al, 2002). The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 has also led to changes in classroom demographics, increasing enrollment among students with disabilities (Horn et al., 2002).

Nontraditional students tend to come from more varied backgrounds than their traditional counterparts and therefore offer the instructor both challenges and opportunities to enrich learning experiences in the classroom. Teachers should make a special effort to include readings that offer a variety of perspectives and relevant research on diverse groups. It is also important for teachers to promote a spirit of openness and tolerance in the classroom that will encourage exploration and cooperation among various groups. Teachers should also quickly correct any misinformation or tensions that are based on stereotypes related to age, ethnicity, sex, disability, religion, etc. that may occur among students in the classroom.

"Respect for everyone is addressed at the beginning of the semester," notes **Evette Richardson**, a business educator at Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia. "Chapter 1 in our textbook has an objective that addresses diversity challenges. Therefore, this is an opportune time to stress being aware of other people's cultures and their nonverbal signals."

Because students from different backgrounds bring different learning styles to the classroom, teachers should use a variety of teaching styles to engage their students. Some cultures, for example, stress individual initiative whereas others emphasize collective efforts. A variety of assessment formats also gives students different ways to demonstrate their learning. Portfolios, papers, oral reports, and group projects should be used in addition to the more conventional tests.

Simple, direct language should be used to communicate assignments, learning objectives, and grading criteria in order to avoid any unnecessary confusion for students who use English as a second language. And unless vocabulary is being tested, simple, direct language should also be used in exam questions. "Some students tend to write the way they write in their native language," observes Richardson. "Occasionally, a student will place words in a sentence in a different order. For example, the student will write, 'The computer new was delivered to Mrs. Brown' rather than 'The new computer was delivered to Mrs. Brown.'"

Nontraditional students may need more reinforcement with their written work, she notes. They may need more written comments on their papers and individual discussion from the teacher. Computer assignments can help reach students with minimal English skills. The Internet can provide these students access to international and non-English materials that may not be found in the school library. Allowing students to communicate electronically may also permit non-native English-speakers time to think and compose their thoughts in ways that are less intimidating than spontaneous class discussions where they may struggle to find the right English words.

"We have a good number of international students who could be considered nontraditional students," says **Linda Hefferin**. Indeed, approximately three percent of students in U.S. colleges are international students. To increase their chances for success at her institution, Hefferin says that they are paired with a faculty mentor. Richardson notes that teachers must be prepared to deal with students from all over the world; she has had students from Columbia, Peru, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, the Czech Republic, Vietnam, and China.

Active Learning Strategies and Regular Feedback Mechanisms

"While no one strategy works for the widely diverse student body in our

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classrooms today," notes Hefferin, "I find two simple strategies especially helpful in retaining nontraditional students: communication and engagement. Continual communication with students is especially critical so that they feel connected to me, the course, the college, and, most importantly, to the other students in the class."

"The second strategy that works well with nontraditional students is to provide meaningful, hands-on assignments that engage them in the learning process," Hefferin says. "Small, frequent assignments enforce time management and critical thinking skills. Sometimes these small assignments can be combined into a larger project that culminates as a class presentation."

Indeed, educational researchers have found that adult learners tend to prefer active, self-directed learning, where they take responsibility for their own learning and approach it with a task- or need-to-know-centered orientation as opposed to a subject-matter orientation. "Our students want practical instruction and information, and they want it delivered so that they can immediately apply the information," notes Jaderstrom. "These students want hands-on applications with high standards and immediate feedback. They need to see their accomplishments and know that they are progressing toward their goals."

At Santa Rosa Junior College, Jaderstrom notes that a combination of collaborative and individual learning is used in each class. In the communication class, for example, there are videos, group assignments, frequent short answer quizzes, e-mail and Web assignments, a field trip to observe telephone techniques at a temporary agency, and telephone role playing with a phone system simulator.

However, with older students, sometimes teachers face the challenge of exposing these students to new teaching methodologies. Olivo, who teaches adults switching to teaching careers, observes, "A challenge I face as an educator is to get these students to think outside the box when it comes to instructional strategies and assessment. These students have the business content, but often want to instruct via the traditional lecture method—that is how they were taught! However, once they are exposed to active learning and other new instructional strategies, they are quick to apply these concepts to their teaching."

"Some of our younger students have been exposed to collaborative learning in high school, but many of our nontraditional students have little experience working in teams," notes Hefferin. "While students sometimes complain about their team members or group assignments, their evaluations at the end of the course almost always indicate that the majority of the students find collaborative assignments a valuable learning tool."

Providing a Student Support Network

Research has shown that providing important support services, such as counseling, financial aid, transportation, and child care options, are one of the most important factors in helping to retain nontraditional students.

Santa Rosa Junior College has taken the lead in adapting its student services to accommodate the increasing number of nontraditional students who are quickly becoming the norm rather than the exception.

"We try hard to build a community for our nontraditional students, starting with the welcoming computer lab, friendly lab assistants, and dedicated, caring instructors," says Jaderstrom. "Our students are encouraged to work together and develop friendships with each other so that they develop a support system. When problems arise (as they will), the other students help solve problems. We informally bring cookies and treats to classes, and we celebrate holidays. We hold a potluck and exchange recipes. We provide interview clothes (donated by business-women in the community). We have a counselor who specifically deals with our students and their problems. The counselor can make referrals and help with personal problems so that instructors can concentrate on teaching."

Indeed, Jaderstrom considers the counselor critical to the success of her college's program. "The counselor has an interest in our programs and in the type of students who take our classes. He/she has access to resources in our community to help the students. The counselor has also provided workshops for instructors on methods of helping our students succeed in the classroom."

Jaderstrom further observes: "If a student had a personal problem during the time that he or she was attending class, we would personally walk the student to the counselor so that the student could receive help. We discovered that if we would not walk the student, the student might not seek the help on his or her own. Last semester I had a student who had a verbally abusive husband who threatened to kick her out of the house and take away her car so that she wouldn't be able to attend class. I certainly wasn't qualified to help her handle these problems, but the counselor talked with her and then made an appointment for the student with our college psychologist."

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Online Classes and Nontraditional Students

"I am both a business teacher and tennis coach, and it keeps me quite busy," says **Chris Walker-Spencer,** who teaches at Camden Hills Regional High School in Rockport, Maine. "I'm also a new dad, and I want as much time as possible with my daughter. The online opportunity fit my needs perfectly. I think there is a huge demand for quality, convenient instruction."

Like Jeffrey Brawn and Margaret Popp, Walker-Spencer is completing his teacher certification requirements online. They are all former students of **Arthur McEntee** who have taken the online methods course developed by NBEA. All agree that it would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve their education and career goals without an online alternative. Popp, for example, lives 60 miles from the nearest university.

Like his students, McEntee is able to work from a distance because of online technologies. He lives four hours from the University of Maine at Machias and can use his computer to teach from home.

Distance technologies, especially online technologies, are revolutionizing the ability of older adults to take classes and further their education. According to the NCES, approximately eight percent of undergraduates took distance education courses in 1999-2000. Among those who did, 59 percent took the course over the Internet (Horn et al., 2002). Older adults were also more likely to report taking distance education courses than younger students—10 to 13 percent of students 24 and older versus four percent of students 18 and younger and seven percent of those 19 to 23 years old (Horn et al., 2002).

"Our university, like many other institutions, has seen an increase in online courses," observes **Tena B. Crews,** associate professor in the Center for On-Line Learning at the State University of West Georgia in Carrollton, Georgia. "Courses that are taught at least 51 percent online using Web CT or GSAMS (Georgia Statewide Academic and Medical System, which allows two-way, interactive video) rose from 62 in 1995-96, serving approximately 1,100 students, to 219 online courses in 2001-02, with approximately 3,000 students being served."

Facilitating Student Interaction and Performance

Among students taking courses on the Internet, approximately half liked their online courses as much as regular classes, reports the NCES (Horn et al., 2002). "The only negative was the lack of connection I felt with other students on an informal basis," observes Walker-Spencer. "I had a good feel for where they stood on business issues, but we never had time to chat before class or have a laugh together."

The main drawback of online instruction is the lack of face-to-face, personal contact with the teacher and fellow students. Teachers must look for alternative ways to enhance the student-teacher bond and to facilitate interaction among students. One solution, notes McEntee, is to have electronic bulletin boards where class members can see and share each other's work.

Chat rooms are also helpful. Crews recommends limiting the number of students in a chat session to avoid confusion and to ensure that every student has an opportunity to participate. "A good method to implement is to previously post a question/idea/discussion topic on the bulletin board with a note that certain students (six to eight) will meet in the chatroom to discuss this topic on a particular date," she says. "You may have 30 students in the class, and your class meets for two hours. You could then meet with six students at a time for approximately 20 minutes during those two hours."

Threaded discussions also work well in online classes, notes Crews. "The instructor can post a question/idea/discussion topic, and one student will respond. The next student should then agree or disagree with the first student's response and add an additional thought to the discussion. This format continues until everyone has participated."

Getting to know the online students and maintaining a regular e-mail connection with them is essential to the creation of a successful learning environment, notes **Susan Jaderstrom.** Students can also be assigned e-mail partners or buddies and encouraged to build and share their own Web pages and online journals.

Creating multiple types of interactions is a key means to enhancing the online learning process and promoting not only the retention of nontraditional students, but also their academic performance and understanding of new ideas.

Online Teaching Strategies

Because of their busy schedules and high need for flexibility, distance education students tend to prefer individually paced instruction. Popp, for example, notes that she completed much of her coursework on Saturdays, Sundays, at night, and on snow days. On occasion, notes McEntee, teachers may need to be willing to bend a bit with due dates on assignments.

However, it is also important not to let students mistake flexibility for laxity. "When a student is 45 years old and not organized enough to create a unit plan by a certain deadline, I am not sure how much one can change that person's habits," notes **Nancy Groneman.** Because some students may think online courses are easier than traditional courses, teachers must establish and emphasize high performance expectations and challenging learning tasks.

Building effective Web pages is perhaps one of the most important online teaching strategies. Online course materials need to be user-friendly, with good visuals and easy-to-follow course guides. It is also important for teachers to be thoroughly familiar with the various technologies they will be using, such as the platform they will use to deliver the course—Web CT, Blackboard.com, etc.

Since text is not as easy to read on-screen as it is on paper, short, clear paragraphs with simple, direct language work best. Color can be used to organize Web pages and emphasize text. A calendar page can help students pace their work and inform them about assignment due dates, exams, and quizzes. Finally, a course evaluation page will help teachers obtain vital feedback so they can continue to improve their online courses.

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TEACHING THE GROWING POPULATION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

TEACHING . . . continued from page 6

"Instructors also confer about students who are missing classes," notes Jaderstrom. "If a student misses one class, and we have not received a voice mail message from him/her (a requirement for all of our classes is a voice mail message explaining why the student will not be in class), we call the student. We have found that if we let them start missing classes with no accountability, we probably have lost them as students."

Nontraditional students, with their busy, often complicated lives, require many different kinds of support. Institutions where there is a team effort among instructors, administrators, counselors, and other staff to help nontraditional students achieve their learning goals tend to experience less attrition and more success in meeting the needs of these individuals. ■

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